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Sensible Nonsense

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SENSIBLE NONSENSE

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Art in Craft/Material Studies at Virginia Commonwealth University.

By

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Bachelor of Fine Art in Fine Art, The School of the Art Institute of Chicago, 2009

Director: Blair Clemo

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Richmond, Virginia
May 2016

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of
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Abstract

“Truth happens only by establishing itself in the strife and the free space opened up by truth itself. Because truth is the opposition of clearing and concealing, there belongs to it what is here called *establishing*.”ⁱ—Martin Heidegger

All things contain their own individual existence. When I look at objects I notice material, tradition, individual history. These are starting points for my imagination to seed and germinate. My ideas are fragmented, nonlinear and nonsensical to others but they hold honesty to me. Honesty is powerful and is worth sharing.

This document is an examination of my work during my graduate studies. I will explain the importance of my relationship with: the imagination, jokes, materials, traditions and process as these are constant variables of my art practice.

The Imagination.

Roger Fry's *An Essay in Aesthetics*, looks at the nature of graphic arts in relation to the nature of instincts. In considering his essay I began to think how the imagination is separated from reality. Creature life is compiled of instinctive reactions to sensible objects and their accompanying emotions, but humans, having the faculty of "imaginative life" and the ability to recall memories, to analyze them over and over which can create a sense of perception within these reflections. In a way the brain is able to live a double life. The real-life is based upon instinctive responses to events of reality but the imaginative life does not have to abide by any morality allowing for whole consciousness to focus upon the perceptive and emotional aspect of the experienceⁱⁱ. This essay is an explanation of how the mind establishes perceptions associated with experiences from reality. The essay also separates perception from the imaginative life, as the imaginative life is free and perceptions are tethered to their origin of reality. Roger Fry continues with how the imaginative life relates to art.

*"Art, then, is an expression and a stimulus of this imaginative life, which is separate from actual life by the absence of responsive action. Now this responsive action implies in actual life moral responsibility. In art we have no such moral responsibility—it presents a life freed from the binding of necessities of our actual existence."*ⁱⁱⁱ

Processing through the imagination is how I respond and engage with my existence. I make observations on reality and then allow my imagination to travel, which is often to the absurd or to formulate a joke. My art practice is a documentation of how I take in information and then process it through imagination.

All objects and materials have a connective conscious understanding that can be recognized by others or have a subconscious sense of their thingliness. This is a connective point for others to begin to access my mode of thinking..



My installation for the *Palette Cleanser* show was of eight snowmen composed of different materials. I see these snowmen as the start of a conversation between materials and sculpture. Snowman function as an ideal sculptural form to breathe life into materials

by following the process of how snowmen are created. Snowmen are sculptures of snowballs. In the process of their creation they collect debris from the ground. Snowmen not only represent the materials they are made from but also the process that created them.

Utilizing the snowman as a recognizable form, material-jokes begin to emerge. Materials share overlapping qualities with one another, which then serve as a connection for a joke to begin. With *Anything Goes When You Got Playdough* I started to make playdough as it has similar properties as snow and would serve as a good substitute. Playdough being rolled around collects debris in the same manner as a snowball. The result is a grotesque blob of a sculpture that displays shared material characteristics. Over a short time the form of *Anything Goes When You Got Playdough* fell apart from its own weight. It lived a life as long as a snowman would last in that space. There is a silly-poetry in these snowmen. They are created from the same process, with materials that share characteristics but create a very different final object. With materials existing as they are there is no notion of failure. That specific material or object is doing what it is capable of doing. There is no falsity in the thing.

Full of Hot Air Sr. exhibits what could be seen as a “failure”. Over the duration of the exhibition the “artisanal” hot air escaped from the balloons leaving the form deflated. To some this could be seen as a failure as the piece loses its form over time but the piece exhibits the life of an object. The work may have had a shorter lifespan when compared to a human or a rock but the piece maintained its existence to its full capacity. The deflating nature of *Full of Hot Air Sr.* was further highlighted by the adjacent placement of *Full of Hot Air Jr.*



The Joke

Jokes share similarities with Roger Fry's ideas on the relationship between reality and the imagination. The joke starts with reality or truth, as a point of reference, and then continues along a linear narrative into the imaginative or illogical. *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* gives an example of this type of joke beginning in reality and the logical but then deviating into the illogical.

Peasant 1: We found a Witch! May we burn her?

(Peasant mob) Burn her!

Sir Bedevere: How do you know that she is a witch?

Peasant 1: Cause she looks like one!

Sir Bedevere: There are ways of telling whether she is a witch.

Peasant 1: Are there? Oh well, tell us.
Sir Bedevere: Tell me. What do you do with witches?
Peasant 1: Burn them.
Sir Bedevere: And what do you burn, apart from witches?
Peasant 1: More witches.
Peasant 2: Wood.
Sir Bedevere: Good. Now, why do witches burn?
Peasant 3: ...because they're made of...wood?
Sir Bedevere: Good. So how do you tell whether she is made of wood?
Peasant 1: Build a bridge out of her.
Sir Bedevere: But can you not also build bridges out of stone?
Peasant 1: Oh yeah.
Sir Bedevere: Does wood sink in water?
Peasant 1: No, no, it floats! It floats! Throw her into the pond!
Sir Bedevere: No, no. What else floats in water?
King Arthur: A Duck.
Sir Bedevere: Exactly. So, logically...
Peasant 1: If she weighed the same as a duck... She's made of wood.
Sir Bedevere: And therefore...
Peasant 2: ...A witch!

—Monty Python and the Holy Grail^{iv}

The narrative moves along through threads of truths. By their logic witches and wood float but two truths do not make the argument logical. The scene is part logical and illogical at the same time and puts the viewer in a silly-limbo. One dictionary definition of “funny” is something difficult to explain or understand. But in this nonsense there is a trap of intellectual stimulation, which is a shared commonality with art. Both art and the joke create a new context for consideration that engages the viewer. Art appears to be more critical, as it may lack the silliness. Both make an observation but the joke is just sillier as it goes into a place of the imagination. It is in this imaginative place that I investigate while making. I find this stimulating.

Complex jokes are the kinds of stimulation that I enjoy making most. Making a stimulating cycle of objects can keep me mentally and physically moving around an

exhibition space. *Thesis Wall Installation* (*Avant-Palette, Cookie Jar, Halloween Vase, Lobster platter*) keeps me in a limbo of stimulation. The faux-marble palette rests on an unfinished wall that creates a deconstructed finished sense. This limbo is further highlighted by the diagonal lines of the palette against the vertical and horizontal lines of the exposed wall. Pressure between the two keep me going back and forth. *Halloween Vase* alludes to the idea of a joke with a wink that breaks the tension and rewards with a golden cookie jar.

Traditions and Materials

I experience friction being a contemporary maker that uses a material that's steeped in tradition and history. Clay objects have an extensive history, and are some of humans earliest innovations and have a presence in most human societies. Ceramics in human history have filled the roles of both functional and decorative objects ranging from pipes, food vessels and tiles to storage vessels and jewelry, etc. Overtime traditions are established in individual cultures that are then passed down through generations and can dictate ideals of form, material composition, and inherent values of objects. Deviation from traditions can be seen as angsty and rebellious which creates the friction between old ideals of tradition and new aesthetics for contemporary artists. There is a suppression of change. A need for my deviation occurs from the want to create something new or different.



Halloween Vase is derived from my affinity for Korean celadon vases. I find these vases beautiful in form, patterning, eloquent in their use of slip inlay with celadon and have a great amount of respect for these objects and their unknown makers. I see these vases as a representation of tradition and aesthetic values of specific eras or dynasties but there are some historical biases as artifacts sometimes only represent certain groups of people, such

as noble or wealthy families. With being an Anglo-American I don't feel as though I have a predominant or recognizable heritage. This led me into looking for an idea of self. I began to create tall bulbous vases, covered in slip, to sketch circular patterns onto. It was around Halloween and I thought pumpkins would be suiting. The border patterns on the Korean vases resemble flower or lotus pedals. But by putting on some eyes the pedals they looked like blobby ghosts. These actions weren't for malice or for spite but rather an attempt to adapt an object of tradition and to create something new. When I create an object I embrace that I am the maker and allow myself the liberties to respond in my own manner but I also still abide by some of the rules set forth in those traditions.

Material value and material characteristics can be defined by tradition. For centuries some European societies coveted Porcelain over earthenware. This fact is one of the main reasons behind my decision to primarily using earthenware clay, as it is unassuming and undervalued. Earthenware, being a more readily available claybody, does not carry the pretensions of porcelain or the glaze palette of high-fire atmospheric firings. In this pursuit of porcelain faience wares were created. Opaque tin-glaze would conceal earthenware forms in an attempt to imitate porcelains. I think this action is dishonest to the materials and takes away from the collaborative quality between materials, process and maker. In my work I often will leave spots of exposed clay to deconstruct these pretentious. Exposing the making process in this manner is a part of my work. These bits of information get read in the final object as I feel they should.

Taking into account these small details I create a sense of something new; the object is not this, nor that. Martin Heidegger's, *The Origin of the Work of Art*, discussion of the thingliness of a thing reinforces the idea of traditional functions.

"In the light to which of the essential definition of the work we have reached at this point, according to which the happening of truth is at work in the work, we are able to characterize creation as follows: to create is to let something emerge as a thing that has been brought fourth. The work's becoming a work is a way in which truth becomes and happens. It all rests in the essence of truth."^v

Our perceptions of objects and materials are affected by history and it's hard to break from those notions of an object, thing or material as it has been previously defined. We are told what ideals, are and we are then confined into that space of what is considered ideal without question. This would be all well and good if time were at a standstill and nothing changed. But time is progression of existence and things change.

As tradition is passed down through multiple generations it becomes more established and widely accepted. This, for me, can be daunting and confining, as I don't relate in the same manner to these objects or the time they represent. But that is not to condemn tradition. Tradition and history are sources of inspiration to derive new work from.

Rosalind Krauss offers an example of the relationship between tradition and the individual in *Originality of the Avant Garde*.

"Thus what Austen's, Gulpin's, and the Dictionary's picturesque reveals to us is that although the "singular" and the "formulaic" or repetitive may be semantically opposed, they are nonetheless conditions of each other: the two logical halves of the concept of "landscape". The prioress and repetition of pictures is necessary to the singularity of the picturesque, because of the beholder singularity depends on being recognized as such, a re-cognition made possible only by a prior example"^{vi}

Tradition establishes itself through repetition, much like the idea of the picturesque, when passed down through generations. Once something becomes regular it then turns to mundane and loses its stimulation. The avant-garde moved the status quo in the search for something new. There is a natural need for stimulation.

Studies of chimpanzees show unnatural and abnormal behavior such as throwing rocks, head banging, and long-term behavior dysfunction is produced when mental enrichment is not fulfilled.^{vii} Simulation and mental enrichment is required across the animal kingdom and is not limited just to primates. Crocodilians, logs with teeth, display acts of play through their interaction with other crocodilians, giving piggyback rides to their mates and showing a fondness for pink flowers.^{viii} Aesthetic tastes, levels of mental stimulation needed and capacity of mental engagement differ from creature to creature and from person to person, but all creatures need to be engaged.

Engagement of life experience is not simply needed to have fulfillment but is required to have a healthy life. Dr. Gabor Mate points out that many human health and mental disorders, such A.D.D., heart diseases and addiction are derived from culture and society idealizing individualism then ostracizing people for being different. Through this social separation from the lack of acceptance, non-normative acts of creativity and expression are then repressed. When an individual becomes repressed or ostracized for doing what they feel they need to, to express themselves a larger health concerns arise from the anxiety^{ix}. As burdens become more difficult to manage they seek other outlets for escape such as drugs, alcohol or sex to compensate for what is lacking. This can also offer

explanation for the behavior dysfunction and emotional disconnect of isolated captive chimpanzees.

Process

“I am a quality control freak. I have to do it badly in the right way.”—Grayson Perry^x

I cannot remove myself from the making processes. Clay is a material that reflects my natural response to my pragmatic making process. If something needs to be addressed it gets addressed directly. Larger platters require broad rims. To do this I pinch coils around a slab until a rim is established in way that suit the form. This addition generates new weight and stress to the form that I then must create structural supports for: an additional pinched outer coil is added on top of the rim. Aesthetically this rounds and smooth's the outer edges, creating more control and intent. This also reinforces the outer edge from some cracking as the rim dries. I welcome superficial cracks as they highlight human process over machine process or industrial products. Creating my own process is fulfilling as it reflects my personality and that is something I find valuable.



In *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, Friedrich Schiller refers to an object created from the play impulse and human interacting with material, as the “*living shape*.” Schiller’s explanation uses the example of marble being lifeless and the maker being shapeless but together they create living shape. Clay embodies my peculiar and individual process of creating by capturing my tactile handling of material. Every medium has its own characteristics and every artist has their own draw to their chosen medium. Over the course of that person’s life they develop a relationship, a personalized process, with that medium or object. If all three, material, process, and maker, can be expressed in an object then that is a thing of beauty and it is honest.

“But it is grounded too in those uncanny experiences of creativity by means of which something new enters the world. This may be one of the reasons people cleave to the sweetness of life. It ties the sweetness of life to a vitality

of being, even more than a preordained end, purpose, or 'fullness' with which it is officially invested."^{xi}—William E Connolly

I find engagement through active problem-solving in making an object. There is more challenge in, and stimulation from, discovering how to do something in an individual's manner of creating.



The thesis exhibition presented a new task, dealing directly with space. My response to this issue was to recognize that this was a gallery/white wall space. *Museum Quality Lions* was my answer. Historically lions function as symbols of majesty and awe as they flank the entrances of some major institutions. For me they were engrained in my mind as these prestigious sculptures that I had seen more and more over time. It made sense to continue this idea to establish my exhibition space. It was important for them to be handmade from clay as this asserted me as the maker. The lions establish the thesis exhibition space that then transitions into the rest of the work.

I find creating objects and curating space fulfilling to my existence. It is an action of active thinking with no real agenda. Making things and interacting with stuff is a middle ground between reality and imagination. I believe that that honesty is worth sharing.

Image List

<i>Anything Goes When You Got Playdough</i> (2015). 14" x 14" x 13" Earthenware, Majolica, Playdough, Debris, Resin.	7
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- ⁱⁱⁱ "Roger Fry 'An Essay in Aesthetics'" In *Art in Theory: 1900-2000 An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, edited by Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, 76. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2002.
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2015

Sensible Nonsense— Graduate Thesis Exhibition, Anderson Gallery, Richmond, VA
VCU-HALL—Kansas City, VCU NCECA Group Exhibition, Kansas City, MO

2015

Pallet Cleanser—MFA Candidacy Exhibition, Warehouses22, Richmond, VA
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2016 VCU Graduate Research Grant—*VCU-Hall* Exhibition

2015 Virginia Commonwealth University—GTA (Graduate Student Assistant)